

What is Teaching?

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What is teaching? As I started putting this essay together, I realized that most of my remarks were aimed at students and junior faculty. What is written here, then, is my attempt to speak to the newcomers in teaching. What is also here is a list of things that worked for me in the classroom, the clinic and the laboratory. I am giving you some highlights from my ca. 35 years of experience with teaching. But there is a caveat: I have no formal training in teaching and have never performed any research in teaching. A lot of my conclusions are based on empirical observations; i.e., seat-of-the-pants studies!

Teaching is a contract between a student and a teacher. This implies that teachers and students have an agreement and some distinct obligations to each other. There is also an agreement to give the teaching obligation your best shot, and to expect the same from all the learners. Good teaching is hard work and every class meeting is a performance. The good teacher truly likes what he or she does and takes up the task at hand with vigor. If this contract meets your career goals, you may be on the way to becoming an outstanding teacher!

In the typical setting, the student gathers information from the teacher; in a broader context, the wise teacher is also a student. The teacher-student relationship is dynamic. Teaching is bidirectional and challenging. This is the case with a highly enthusiastic teacher - student relationship. The common goal of teaching is always the same: learning.

Rewards of teaching. The most important gift of teaching is learning. After teaching Chemistry 101, I had become proficient in dealing with all the equations, topics, problems, diagrams, text, etc. I could field any kind of question. This knowledge when acquired by the junior instructor will greatly facilitate the same teaching the next time the course comes around. The teaching is hardest during the first semester, (or quarter) because everything is new. The second time through is much simpler assuming that most of the teaching material can be reused.

When updating the teacher's notes, some clean up of the notes is usually possible to the benefit of the teacher and student.

Other rewards are the students who ask a lot of questions and even bug you some. The wise instructor will turn questions into discussions for the benefit of the class. Other sources of joy are the truly good students who light you up with stimulating questions and discussions. Pray that at least a few really bright students populate your class. What do you do with the students who sit in the back of the class and never open their mouths? The only thing that has worked for me fairly well is calling on students. I have also tried asking students to make short presentations. My style is to leave a very short time between my asking the question and the time I give the answer. I don't leave anyone twisting in the wind.

Praise. Don't fail to give praise when it is due: "That was an excellent question/topic/suggestion/input/thought" etc. Students and teachers alike thrive with praise and rewards. Give it out in gobs! It's free and everyone benefits! Praise may even get that kid out of the back of the room! I sometimes sit in the back of the room with my strong, silent types. I'll do almost anything to succeed here.

Teaching is fun. Teaching lets you impress your students with new topics, concepts, knowledge, ideas, thoughts, etc. Where else do you have access to your student's brain? All kinds of mind games are possible to challenge the students. You can praise students as well as make them mad. You can bring out your standards and your limitations. Self-deprecation can work for you to show that you are human after all. The best students will learn how to challenge your teachings and notions. Truly fantastic events can occur in the classroom during teaching episodes. As you mature as a teacher, you will discover the many aspects that may pop up during teaching episodes. This can also be a period of self discovery and growth as a teacher.

More on praise. Here is just one more comment on students and praise. Praise from students is rather rare and it may come to you wrapped up in kindness. Other times, the praise is highly diluted. Get some praise from yourself. Let it be your personal gift from the satisfaction that is the reward of a job well done.

Evaluation forms. These forms have some use with the best and worst teachers; in the middle, they are less useful. Maybe they see us in a new

light: "Oh, if he the gift could give us, to see ourselves as others see us." (With apologies to Robert Burns.) Maybe they stimulate weak instructors to clean up their act. I've filled out many evaluation forms; I think they have helped me a little, but not as much as I would like.

Learning really cannot take place if the learning space is in an uproar. Some learners will be amused and the rest will be angry and frustrated.

Teaching to the best students. Do

you teach to the best students in your learning place? Of course you do; that is the source of at least some of your rewards. This is not a simple problem: How do you strike a balance in your teaching of good, average, and poor students? One approach is to develop some discussion sections and then involve all the students. Watch out for the folks in the back. They may now be under the seats!

The "cold" classroom. Always review your notes before your class. Even the best teacher will come up short if he or she relies on recalling the topic from a while ago. Worse yet; you blow the punch line of your best clean joke and no one laughs! This is an example of the golden loss of opportunity. Too bad for a failed start!

Just a moment on jokes: Jokes can be very valuable in starting a "cold" class, e.g., the last class after a long day. In fact, the joke is really for the teacher to break the ice and get started. A good laugh can be very valuable in the teaching process.

Create a learning atmosphere. The teacher must control the learning atmosphere. The classroom or laboratory or other location of learning is not a democracy; the teacher must usually control and (or) maintain the atmosphere. Having written this, I find that the control by the students may be more effective in some cases. There is no simple formula for effective control. However, without some control, the class may turn into a shambles where no learning occurs.

Learning place tools (1): Slides and handouts. Make sure that the tools for learning are at hand e.g., handouts, slides, overhead pages, and other supplies. It is utterly frustrating to have a class that is ready to go but lacks some key item. Everyone's time is wasted and the time and enthusiasm of the class are lost.

Computer-generated slides. I have used the ubiquitous PowerPoint software to prepare learning sessions. This is useful software. Limit yourself to about 20 slides per lecture. In the typical teaching hour, you can only present one or two ideas. Don't try to cram in too much material. Don't make your slides too busy or the font too small. The myopic guy in the back of the room won't be able to see them, and the rest of the class will be distracted. For slides showing text, I use a 20 X 5 layout, i.e., up to 20 characters, left-to-right, and 5 rows of text, up and down. This works most of the time. White text on a dark blue background works for me. Go for contrast in your slides. Pale green or jaundiced yellow slides don't work. They are typically too pale.

Handouts. I have always liked handouts provided they are of good quality and are freely available. A good handout, possibly the instructor's notes, promotes listening by the class. You should get better attention and less writing. A good handout can save a lot of time on both sides of the lectern. And you really cannot listen effectively and write at the same time. Another approach is to have space on the handout where a few notes on the lecture can be written to bring the written and spoken work closer together.

Learning tools (2): Make sure required equipment is at hand, e.g., laboratory gear, computers, tools, etc. Beginning teachers often make this mistake: the tools are there, but they have not been tested. And of course, Murphy's law obtains: this blunder occurs at the critical, no-salvage moment. An entire class has its time wasted. Boo!

Basic courtesy. Within reason, students and teachers are respectful regardless of what they say or do. A learning experience requires plain courtesy. Or read, "plain respect and decency" all around. Learning really cannot take place if the learning space is in an uproar. Some learners will be amused and the rest will be angry and frustrated. Remember what Harry S. Truman said: "Always do the right thing: you'll please some people and amaze the rest!"

Watch the four-letter words. They do not belong here and may be offensive to many. I'm also a fan of good English usage. It's just a habit with me. I demand it from my graduate students and they just love me! I cannot stand incorrect English. Consider the student lying (laying) in the sun? What is going on and is anyone watching??

Stimulate discussion and thinking. Discussion sections can be helpful provided most everyone participates. There are two ways to ask a question of a class: Method 1, in a tired class: call on one student. This student may have an anxiety attack, and the rest of the class will lapse into a coma! Method 2, ask the whole class for an answer. Now everyone is thinking of a possible answer, and the discussion can now engage the entire class.

Meeting the class on time. I have always regarded a late instructor as rude and flaky! Everyone's time is wasted, and much learning does not take place if you are angry. Most of the time I was in my class early because I liked being there and considered the available time to be precious. The 10-week quarter is very short indeed. The flip side of this problem is announcing absences. The teacher must do it, and there are times and places where the student (s) must give notice.

Giving prompt responses to graded items and exams. Getting grades out on time is a simple courtesy by the instructor. Students are intensely interested in their grades, often because serious decisions are made following publication of their grade. This is an enhancement and decency that is easily given.

Relationship between student and teacher: Trust. The student - teacher relationship must have at least two elements: trust and respect. Trust encompasses at least honesty, candor, integrity, openness, and consistency. Trust means there are no devious acts or untoward surprises. Trust is the basis of the relationship. Everything is on the table regarding the course. The syllabus is ready and available at the beginning of the course. The course requirements are spelled out in detail as are the grading requirements to get a passing (and better) grade. The instructor lets it all hang out; this is a minimum requirement. There are no unpublished events that may affect the grading process.

Respect. Bi-directional respect is possible if you have some agreements on how classroom problems will be resolved. Respect can be the basis of a successful relationship. Respect is not possible in a contentious atmosphere. In positive surroundings, problem areas are discussed openly without temper tantrums and all issues of disagreement are handled in a professional way. Personal vendettas never occur, and the

integrity of the parties is never attacked. In problem solving, there is no screaming or yelling, and coolness prevails! If the issues become more difficult, a referee could be brought in. Respect is like a flower garden: it needs lots of TLC.

Scholarship. All university faculty members know what scholarship is. It is part of the promotion process; promotion cannot go forward without it! Good teaching is good scholarship; it is that simple. Good teaching includes at least the following: study, evaluation, innovation, development, enhancements and research on teaching. I have seen tremendous forward strides of teaching in my career at OSU. The technical advances brought on by computerized teaching have been tremendous. Practically every classroom is equipped with computers, and they greatly facilitate teaching. What an incredible change has occurred in my lifetime. Our students have computer skills that make them stand out as compared to the past. We were the "slide rule" generation. My son did not know what a slide rule could do. But he could do things with his computer where I was lacking. Amazing progress is here!